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Research Note 82-6

COMMUNICATION PROBLEM AREAS BETWEEN BLACK  
AND WHITE SOLDIERS: 1974-1979

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U. S. Army

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## FOREWORD

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Since 1972, the Army Research Institute has had an active research program which has examined the policy, operational problems, and programs of the Army Equal Opportunity Program. One of the early efforts was a contract with the Center for Applied Linguistics, contract No. DAHC 19-74-C-0023 "Problems in Cross-Cultural Communications: A Study of Blacks and Whites in the U.S. Army." The research effort identified specific sources of black-white communication problems in both the verbal and nonverbal realms of communication. The current report describes an in-house effort to establish contemporary perceptions of the problem areas identified in the contractor effort. It has been prepared under RDT&E project 2Q162722A791, Manpower, Personnel and Training, by personnel assigned to the ARI Field Unit at the Presidio of Monterey.

## COMMUNICATION PROBLEM AREAS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE SOLDIERS: 1974-1979

### BRIEF

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#### Requirement:

Effective interpersonal communication is essential for any aggregation of individuals working together. Yet, a variety of factors can reduce the utility of the communications and thereby extend the time necessary to complete assigned tasks. In extreme situations, communication difficulties alone can preclude mission completion. While communication problems arising among military personnel differing in background, role variables, and specific situations are all of potential interest for enhancing soldier productivity, here the focus is on problems of communication arising from perceptual differences correlated with race.

#### Procedure:

A survey instrument was developed based upon problems identified in interviews with officers and enlisted personnel. The final version consisted of both visual and auditory stimuli and was administered to a large sample from four Army installations in 1974 and a sample of 88 soldiers in 1979.

#### Findings:

Several areas of perceived differences continue to exist between blacks and whites. Blacks generally seem more aware of areas whites view as communication problems than whites are of the perceptions of blacks. Assuming sample comparability, it appears that blacks are now less sensitive to certain communication behaviors of whites, while whites indicate little change in their sensitivity to parallel behaviors of blacks.

#### Utilization:

The results identify specific areas where communication difficulties currently exist. However, the results must be viewed circumspectively because of the limited scope and magnitude of this project. Further, research in specific factors which may impede communications among various categories of military personnel seems indicated.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEM AREAS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE  
SOLDIERS: 1974-1979

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## COMMUNICATION PROBLEM AREAS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE SOLDIERS: 1974-1979

A breakdown in meaningful communication is a frequent concomitant variable of hostilities between groups of people, in contexts ranging from interpersonal to international (Szalay, 1967). The overt conflicts between white and black Americans have been no exception (Liberson & Silverman, 1965; Smith, 1973). However, any determination of causality attributable to communication problems in such instances remains uncertain due to the existence of widely-held perceptions of unfairness and of frustration among blacks (Nordlie & Thomas, 1978). The expectation is, however, that qualitatively enhanced communication should improve rather than exacerbate the state of relations between groups in conflict (Rich, 1974).

The focus of this investigation is the current state of perceptual differences concerning several communication problem areas between black and white soldiers of the modern volunteer Army (Bachman, Blair, & Segal, 1977). Areas of concern need not be exclusively of the verbal communication realm; nonverbal communication is itself an autonomous research area concerning communications between blacks and whites (Thompson, 1973). The specific set of difficulties considered here were derived from an earlier study (Taylor, Min, Spears, & Stoller, 1974). Through comparison of current and previous data, tentative perceptual trends of interracial communication problems can be identified.

### METHOD

#### Subjects

Eighty-eight soldiers of paygrade E1 through E4 participated in the experiment. The sample was randomly drawn by a computer program from the personnel rosters of selected combat support and combat service support units at a large Army installation. The design called for equal numbers of both black and white, and male and female personnel. A subsample of 179 junior enlisted soldiers from a 557 subject sample selected from four U.S. Army installations in 1974 is the comparison group for the 5-year trend results.

#### Instrumentation

The primary instrument contained 16 demographic and 55 substantive items in a Likert format developed from interviews with a separate sample of 119 soldiers. A same-race interviewer asked a series of questions, which proceeded from general to specific topics, designed to elicit both verbal and nonverbal communication problem areas between blacks and whites. The final survey included prominent elements of concern and areas where large perceptual differences were found in a tryout survey (see Taylor et al., 1974 for details). The instrument includes a tape of four speech samples to provide a common understanding of speech types, and a silent

video presentation of two scenes with freeze action segments to provide specific, uniform stimuli for 10 nonverbal items.

### Apparatus

Subjects completed the questionnaire in a room containing a table, chair, television monitor, and speaker under one of two conditions. Subjects either completed the instrument among a group of 13 or 14 others in a classroom or in isolation in a small room (approximately 2.0 by 2.7 m) where they were observed through a closed-circuit television system. This environmental factor generated no differences and will not be further discussed.

### Procedure

At the test site subjects were greeted by either a black or white, female soldier assistant of experimenter. When all subjects were seated, an instruction tape was played and the instrument administered. After the last subject was finished, the objectives of the research were explained and any questions were answered by experimenter.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the sample distribution. The research design goals of equal numbers for each subject category were nearly achieved. For each metric item a 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance was computed using the classic regression approach (Petrinovich, 1979; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). Two significant differences were found between males and females on demographic items. Females report more formal education than males ( $F(1,77) = 4.90, p < .05$ ). Females also indicate they had more persons of the other race (black or white, accordingly) with whom they were friendly and on a first name basis before entry into the Army than males indicate ( $F(1,77) = 6.76, p < .05$ ).

Substantive items for which main effects for gender were found are presented in Table 2. For each item females show more agreement than males. In addition, when the proportion of items for which females show more agreement than males is considered ( $39/55 = .709$ ), the value differs significantly from chance ( $Z = 3.09, p < .01$ ). Thus, females show a greater propensity than males to agree with the statements contained in the items. This may represent a response bias specific to female soldiers on surveys dealing with race-related topics (Goehring & Thomas, in press).

Several differences in responses to the demographic items are significant for race. Blacks report more white friends before entry into the Army than whites report black friends ( $F(1,77) = 8.26, p < .01$ ). Further, more blacks indicate having grown up in a city rather than in the suburbs, or not in a city area ( $\chi^2(2) = 15.1, p < .001$ ). No significant differences were observed by race for paygrade, education, current number of other race friends, financial problems of family while growing up, or age. Although



TABLE 1

Sample distribution by race and gender

<u>Race</u>	<u>Gender</u>		Total
	Male	Female	
Black	24	24	48
White	19	21	40
Total	43	45	88

TABLE 2

Items with mean differences by gender<sup>a</sup>

Item	<u>Gender Means</u>		<u>F(1,77)</u>
	Female	Male	
23. In general, most whites think blacks are trying to arrange a date when they are talking to white women.	2.05	2.57	4.34*
24. In general, most whites think blacks are too blunt.	2.27	2.76	4.55*
34. In general, most whites think blacks use prejudice as an excuse for poor work.	2.14	2.80	4.48*

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$

several significant interactions did appear in the analyses of variance, they did not form an interpretable pattern.

Table 3 shows the items for which mean differences by race were observed in the analyses of variance. With the exception of four items, blacks indicated stronger agreement with the statements than whites. There is a topical relationship among the items for which the score of whites is numerically smaller. Two of the items (1 and 18) deal with what blacks think about white southern speech. The means for blacks are in the disagreement range of the scale, while the means for whites are in the "Not Sure" part of the scale. The other two items (23 and 43) both deal with what whites think regarding the behavior of black males toward white females. For both items whites indicate stronger agreement than blacks. Item 43 is also distinguished in that it elicited the most extreme overall response among all of the items (mean = 1.69).

Items can be combined into nondisjoint sets by either content or form providing the basis for scales: Dialect, Topics, Speech Acts, Names, Non-verbal, Blacks Think, and Whites Think. In the 1974 sample significant differences for enlisted personnel by race were observed for all seven scales ( $p < .001$  for each by  $t$  test). Significant differences were found in 1979 sample between blacks and whites for Speech Acts (black mean = 2.46, white mean = 2.91,  $t(83) = 3.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which includes items 6, 11, 13, 19, 20, 22, 24, 31, and 33. There was also a difference observed for the scale Blacks Think (black mean = 2.71, white mean = 2.89,  $t(81) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ) consisting of items 1 through 20 plus 49 and 54.

#### Five-Year Trends

To establish possible perceptual trends since the 1974 administration of the instrument, the raw data from the junior enlisted soldier subsample (79 blacks, 100 whites) was extracted from that data base. Independent group  $t$  tests were calculated by race for each substantive item between the 1974 and the 1979 samples.

Table 4 shows the items with significant 5-year trends for blacks. All tests were two-tailed and test statistics are shown as absolute values. For each item but one, the means for blacks have shifted in the direction of less agreement. The exception is item 1 where the mean shift is consistent with the other items based upon a factor analysis performed on the 1974 data which indicates its loading on the first factor is of the opposite sign of the other items in Table 4 (additional items with negative first factor loadings were 6, 10, 18, and 55). Items 8 and 9 show a clear switch from the agree half of the scale to the disagree half.

Table 5 shows four items with significant trends for whites. Two items (15 and 38) deal with name-calling behavior. Stronger disagreement in the later data is evident. The two remaining items (23 and 43), both dealing with black behavior toward white females, indicate stronger agreement in the recent sample. The nonsignificant trend for blacks on item 43 runs in the opposite direction (1974 mean = 1.63, 1979 mean = 1.96,  $t(122) = 1.95$ ,  $.05 < p < .1$ ).

TABLE 3  
Items with mean differences by race<sup>a</sup>

Item	Race Means		<u>F</u> (1,75)
	Black	White	
1. In general, most blacks think southern white speech sounds friendly.	3.42	2.98	5.67*
5. In general, most blacks dislike for whites to refer to them as "you people."	1.62	2.18	11.45**
11. In general, most blacks think whites ask too many questions.	2.73	3.05	5.49*
14. In general, most blacks think whites ask too many questions about their private lives.	2.60	3.10	7.01**
18. In general, most blacks think southern white speech sounds good.	3.79	3.02	10.61**
19. In general, most blacks think whites try to dominate conversations.	2.60	3.08	4.82*
20. In general, most blacks think whites like to give orders.	1.77	2.41	11.51**
23. In general, most whites think blacks are trying to arrange a date when they are talking to white women.	2.55	2.05	4.25*
25. In general, most whites think it is okay to refer to blacks as "you people."	2.46	2.60	7.85**
31. In general, most whites think blacks who say exactly what they think are militant	2.17	3.25	21.64**

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$   
\*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 3 (continued)

Item	Race Means		<u>F</u> (1,75)
	Black	White	
33. In general, most white officers think it is necessary to give black soldiers orders in great detail.	2.24	2.92	6.58*
43. In general, most whites dislike blacks who date white women.	1.96	1.40	11.48**
45. In general, most whites think there is potential trouble from blacks hanging around in groups.	1.89	2.55	4.56*
47. In general, most whites think blacks who use the "jive" walk are unreliable.	2.44	2.92	4.64*
53. In general, most whites think that blacks who wear afro-hair styles are militants.	3.00	3.62	5.71*

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

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TABLE 4

Items with five-year mean response trends for blacks<sup>a</sup>

Item	Mean		t(122)
	1974	1979	
1. In general, most blacks think southern white speech sounds friendly.	3.80	3.42	2.21*
2. In general, most blacks dislike for whites to call them "brother" to be friendly.	2.41	2.94	2.42*
7. In general, most blacks think black slang is like poetry.	2.47	3.02	2.55*
8. In general, most blacks think whites who use the southern accent are racist.	2.75	3.26	2.62**
9. In general, most blacks think whites like to talk about unimportant things.	2.64	3.27	3.14**
11. In general, most blacks think whites ask too many questions.	2.30	2.73	2.19*
13. In general, most blacks think whites interrupt conversations too much.	2.42	3.00	3.23**
14. In general, most blacks think whites ask too many questions about their private lives.	2.11	2.60	2.45*
15. In general, most blacks think it is okay to call whites in their units "rabbits."	2.95	3.79	4.23**
16. In general, most blacks think it is okay to refer to a group of white EM as "devils."	2.90	3.79	4.80**
17. In general, most blacks think it is okay to call whites "racist."	2.90	3.35	2.40*

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 4 (continued)

Item	Mean		<u>t</u> (122)
	1974	1979	
23. In general, most whites think blacks are trying to arrange a date when they are talking to white women.	2.10	2.55	2.18*
26. In general, most whites think blacks sometimes use "jive" talk to just make whites angry.	2.56	3.17	2.92**
39. In general, most whites think black "jive" sounds militant.	2.15	2.78	2.92**
41. In general, most whites think southern black speech sounds dumb.	2.19	2.80	3.04**
44. In general, most whites dislike blacks standing too close in conversation.	2.14	2.87	4.06**
45. In general, most whites think there is potential trouble from blacks hanging around in groups.	1.53	1.89	2.15*
48. In general, most whites think blacks who dap are militant.	1.80	2.55	3.67**
49. In general, most blacks think it is okay to dap while on duty.	1.73	2.21	2.63**
52. In general, most whites think blacks move around too much when they talk.	2.14	2.71	3.13**
53. In general, most whites think that blacks who wear afro-hair styles are militants.	2.29	3.00	3.25**
54. In general, most blacks think whites show racism by standing too far away.	2.70	3.10	2.13*

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$   
 \*\*  $p < .01$

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TABLE 5

Items with five-year mean response trends for whites<sup>a</sup>

Item	Mean		<u>t</u> (138)
	1974	1979	
15. In general, most blacks think it is okay to call whites in their unit "rabbits."	3.19	3.68	2.21*
23. In general, most whites think blacks are trying to arrange a date when they are talking to white women.	2.55	2.05	2.41*
38. In general, most whites think blacks like to call whites "Charlie."	3.44	3.78	2.11*
43. In general, most whites dislike blacks who date white women.	1.73	1.40	2.26*

<sup>a</sup>For items 1 through 55 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree.

\*  $p < .05$

Considering 5-year trends in the scale scores for blacks, each of the seven scales shows change in the direction of less strong agreement ( $p < .05$ ). No statistically significant changes in scale scores were in evidence for whites ( $p > .30$ ).

In addition, a fundamental difference seems to exist between the responses to the items of the Blacks Think versus Whites Think items. For both blacks and whites in both the 1974 and 1979 samples, greater response variability is observed for the Whites Think than for the Blacks Think scale scores (as assessed by  $F$  tests,  $p < .05$  for all four instances). It may, of course, be possible that this finding reveals a relative homogeneity of the Blacks Think items themselves, rather than a lack of consensus about what whites think.

A secondary dependent variable can be drawn from these data. Since the middle of the scale for the items 1 through 55 is explicitly labeled "Not Sure," it is possible to tabulate the frequency of such responses separately from previously considered item means. A pattern emerges when the proportion of such middle responses is examined by race and type of item. For whites responding to Blacks Think items the proportions for 1974 and 1975 are .32 and .40, respectively. This represents a significant

increase ( $Z = 4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For no less than eight items within the Blacks Think scale, at least half of the whites in the current sample indicated they were not sure. In addition, these two values are different from the proportions for Whites Think items by whites and both types of items by blacks for both administrations, the proportions of mid-scale responses ranging from .17 to .22.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Since, in general, to agree with the statements in the instrument is to concur with the statements made in the interviews, greater agreement may be termed "sensitivity." Viewing the pattern of race differences it appears that, overall, blacks are more sensitive to communication problem areas than are whites. This conclusion holds not only for Blacks Think items but as well for most Whites Think items where a difference by race is present. Also, females appear to be somewhat more sensitive to communication problems than males.

Concerning the comparison of the data from the two administrations, the question of sample comparability arises. The 1974 sample differed from the current one in several ways: It consisted of males only, 18 percent of whom were drafted (versus 1 percent in the current sample) with many others probably joining under threat of being drafted. Also, many were assigned to combat units. In addition, since the current sample was selected from a single installation it lacks the breadth of the earlier sample. While the impact of the gender distribution discrepancy is minor, the influence of the other nonequivalences is not known and may be substantial. In light of this, extreme caution is advised in the interpretation and generalization of the trend data.

The data suggest that blacks have become less sensitive to communicative elements during the 5-year period while whites show little overall change. Perhaps, in 1974 the profile of item means of blacks could be termed hypersensitive. If so, the current data may indicate a desirable reduction from that level. In any case, what except sample noncomparability could account for these striking results, could the widely acknowledged improvement in the racial milieu of the Army have produced such changes, and is it possible that the Army's Equal Opportunity Program has in some way contributed to this change?

While whites show 5-year trends on only four items, two of the items (23 and 43) reveal an increased sensitivity. The black trends for these two items, by direct contrast, are in the direction of decreased sensitivity. While both common knowledge and research (Goehring & Thomas, in press) point to perceptions of and attitudes toward interracial dating and related behaviors as a particularly emotional area, to find such divergent trends is unexpected. These findings, which by themselves must be viewed cautiously, strongly point toward the need for more research exploring black-white communication patterns.

Based upon this small scale preliminary investigation, several questions arise: Can the findings of the investigation be replicated? Can



they be generalized beyond the single installation and restricted paygrade categories? Can they be generalized to the other services and to society at large? Can a theoretical framework be found within which they may be accommodated?

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